

## Gender and Environmental Sustainability: Issues and Problems Involved For Persons with Special Needs In Nigeria

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### ABSTRACT

Sustainability of the environment is one of the major problems facing African people, most especially Nigerians. It is unfortunate that women, by the nature of their daily activities of managing the homes and families are in touch with nature and environment and are at greater risk of health hazards and foetal damage. This paper focuses on the type of education that women need to instill in them knowledge and skills for handling environmental problems. The paper concludes with some recommendations that environmental courses, clubs, training and retraining of teachers, networking with NGOs on environmental education for sustainability should be implemented. To this end, the government should put in place laws and policies for effectiveness of environmental programmes.

**Keywords:** Gender, environmental sustainability, issues and problems, special needs

### INTRODUCTION

African in the pre-colonial days was characterized by relative political equity between the women and the men folks. Each sex had its own sphere of activity over which its leaders exercised control. Women organized the hunting of small animals, the gathering of roots and berries, the provision of water and the care of small children. Men were involve in the hunting of larger animals and the division and storage of the kill. Both participated in the ritual and communal activities of their societies (Collier and Rosaldo in Adesoji 2001). It is worthy of note that women constitute more than half of the world's population. Women in contemporary Africa particularly Nigeria are economically deprived. In African countries, women have played a major role in the different aspect of the rural economy over the centuries. Unfortunately, women are also responsible for much of the environmental destruction taking place in the rural and urban areas (Mabawonku, 2001).

The environment affects weather, food, housing and organisms especially in relation to people, animals and other living things. It touches on health, minerals, mining and agriculture. Most African countries are faced with environmental problems. These include air, water and land pollution such as oil spillage, gas flaring, drought, flooding, soil erosion, deforestation, bush burning and indiscriminate waste disposal especially in the urban areas.

Women create some of the environmental problems mentioned above. Many do not maintain hygiene in their homes and still dispose of their waste carelessly. Also, women cause air pollution through burning wood fire as they cook food for their families. All these activities are hazardous to health. Women are at the receiving end of majority of these problems. In many African countries the education of the females has remained at a much lower level than that of males. Lack of education has subjugated women especially in the rural areas to the bottom of the socio-economic ladder. This has also prevented them from knowledge and understanding of the environment in which they live.

Persons with special needs by nature of their handicapping conditions have impairment in some vital sensory organs been caused by sickness, diseases, and infections from the environment. These cause some damages especially within the first three months of pregnancy to the foetus. As the result of the pollutions and degradation in the environments, some children are therefore born blind, deaf or mentally retarded etc. (Smith, 1971, Mba, 1995).

Access to quality education and the acquisition of knowledge on environmental sustenance could reduce this environmental degradation and also create opportunities for women (persons with special needs in particular) to increase their potentials beyond the traditional household tasks so that they can take their place in local, national and global development.

### MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS AND ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY

In September 2000, 189 world leaders met at the millennium summit and committed themselves and their countries to eight goals known as Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) aimed at meeting the needs of the worlds poorest people (UNDP, 2005). The eight goals, which are to be met in partnership with the world's leading development institutions by the target date of 2015, are to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger, achieve universal primary education, promote gender equality and empower women, reduce child mortality, improve maternal health, combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases, ensure environmental sustainability and lastly,

develop a global partnership for development (United Nations Millennium Declarations, 2000). For each of these goals, the world leaders established yardsticks for measuring results, not just for the developing countries but also for the developed countries that assist in providing the funds for development programmes and for the multilateral institutions that help countries implement them (UNDP, 2005). However, for the purpose of this paper, the focus will be on Goal 7 which is targeted towards environmental sustainability.

The environment could be described as the outer physical and biological system in which man and other physical and biological system in which man and other organisms live (Udoh and Akpan, 1997). A clean and protected environment is important for human safety, good health and sustainable development. These include air, water and land pollution such as oil spillage, gas flaring, drought, flood, soil erosion, deforestation, bush burning and indiscriminate waste disposal especially in the urban areas. In general environmental problems affects human health and survival. However, the impact is more on women than men and this could be reduced if the state of preparedness is better.

## **GENDER AND ENVIRONMENTAL CHALLENGES IN NIGERIA**

In Nigeria domestic waste disposal poses not only an embarrassing menace but also serious health hazards. This includes human wastes and refuse. People continue to dump refuse on road side streams and open place. In most cases, the local councils do not provide enough facilities and infrastructure for refuse disposal. However, where the council provides the facility, the people often do not comply with the directive on waste disposal.

Manufacturing industries constitute a major source of environmental pollution in some African countries where there are no strict controls over industrial waste. These and other wastes contaminate drinking water pollute fresh water, the grazing farming and all agricultural lands and aquatic ecosystems. Residents and agricultural products of cities close to cement companies have often been exposed to tonnes of dust made up of calcium, magnesium, sulphur and iron. Since women do work in factories having direct contact with industrial pollution may cause serious damage to their health and to their foetus, in case of the pregnant women this would lead to an impairment of any sensor organ in the foetus. The child may eventually becomes deaf, mentally retarded etc.

Water pollution is another serious environmental problem. pollution of water can destroy fisheries agricultural products, food and human lives. Diseases got from using bad water include onchocerciasis (river blindness) a disease which results into eye damage and blindness and is prevalent in many African countries. Typhoid, guinea worm, iron deficiency are some of the other diseases caused by drinking contaminated water. The drains also constitute Major source of mosquito breeding and filth. This in turn causes malaria and other deadly diseases. Each year, diarrhea diseases from contaminated water kill about two million episodes of illness (The World Bank, 1999).

Oil spillage is another serious environmental pollution in Nigeria. This is caused by the leaking of crude petroleum from pipe and storage facilities. The oil exploration accidents have made people to become victims of diarrhea, dysentery and other health hazards. This is more prevalent in the riverine areas where offshore drilling takes place. The nutrition and health of the people of this area have been seriously endangered (NEST, 1991 and Oyesola, 1995).

The main sources of air pollution are domestic fires, gas flaring industry and transports. The smoke from air pollution constitutes health hazard. Bush fallowing (bush burning done to clear the land for the next planting season) in traditional Nigeria society is responsible for the emission of an estimated 871,000 tones of dust per annum and 584,000 tones of smoke particles annually (NEST, 1991). Also air pollution could also be caused predominantly in the rural areas where women cook with fire wood.

Deforestation is one of the serious environmental problems in Nigeria. It has led to decline in accessibility of both the wood and non-wood forest products. This is especially carried out by the increased dependence of women in some areas on forest resource for firewood for domestic use.

Among women farmers, there is the hazards of applying agricultural pesticides and consequent exposure to toxic pesticides. According to World Health Organization, many of the victims who come into direct contact with those chemicals during work in the fields or through contaminated food and water supplies were women.

## **ENVIRONMENTAL CHALLENGES AND PERSONS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS**

Professionals in the field of Special Education have attributed some of the causes of disabilities to environmental problems, which manifest in form of sickness diseases poison and other infections suffered by the mother during the first three months of her pregnancy. This infection may be responsible for such other

handicaps as mental retardation, deafness, blindness etc (Mba, 1995). According to Smith (1971), the largest group of the retarded are those who have been handicapped as a result of environmental deprivation during their early formative years. Statistical estimate during and since the International year of disabled persons (1981) revealed exposure of mother to infection and disease and as leading cause of childhood deafness. The first on this list is Rubella infection. Rubella is common virile while disease which may kill, blind, cripple, or deafen the unborn child when contracted by a pregnant woman in the first three months of pregnancy. It attacks and destroys the eyes, ears and other organs (Abang, 2005).

Women are usually at greater risk of sickness, disease or death from pesticide, poisoning than their male counterparts because women comprise more than half of the agricultural workforce. The exposure of women to pollution often makes them more susceptible to abortion and foetal damage (Adesoji, 2001). As the primary managers of the home affairs, women are more open to contact diseases due to poor sanitation, air and water related diseases. These are in turn transmitted to their children and sometimes husbands. It is a vicious cycle as the diseases spread, productivity and sometimes mortality are affected.

### **WOMEN EDUCATION AND ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY**

The education of women (special needs persons in particular) promotes improved health to the woman and other family members; it helps to maintain hygienic behaviour among others. An educated woman is likely to understand the advantages of using cooking stove instead of firewood, if she can afford both. Therefore educating the girl child is a worthwhile investment for a country's development.

The purpose of environmental education is to assist the public to understand, appreciate and change their attitude favourably towards their environment. One of its main objectives is to prepare, build and equip learners for useful living within the society. This is contained in article 18(3) of the Nigerian National Policy on education. The objectives of environmental education are to help individuals and social groups to acquire an awareness, basic understanding, social values and skills to solve environmental measures and educational programme, in terms of ecological, political, economic, social aesthetic and educational factors. Its main function is to make people aware of the problems around them and enlighten them on the activities they can engage into improve their surroundings for better living (Udoh, 1997).

The education of the girl child needs to be slightly different from that of the boys. It must be streamlined to prepare her for academic excellence, home management and complete adaptation of the natural environment. This will make for a 'complete woman'. However, education about the environment is life long and the process can be categorized into two- formal and non-formal. The formal education takes place in the school – primary, secondary and the tertiary level. The non-formal takes place at home through adult literacy programmes, the media, organized campaign, and other methods.

In Nigeria, there already exist a curriculum that incorporates nature study, hygiene and agriculture in the primary school. Children are taught to keep clean environments and to love nature and the entire environment. Environmental education falls within the affective domain and this would be demonstrated through appreciation and cultivation of a life long respect for nature and the environment even after leaving school.

At the secondary schools, the following subjects are taught: health science, physics, chemistry, biology, among others because they are considered as relevant to environmental education to all students. It is being suggested that a separate subject on the environment should be taught in secondary schools and more girls could be encouraged to take it. This would enable female students in particular to have an understanding of ecosystem, preventive health, appropriate use of pesticides and other agricultural products and a knowledge of handling cases of land, water, air and industrial pollution.

At the tertiary level, like universities, polytechnic and other institutions the purpose of environmental education is to develop knowledge and skills so that when girls (persons with special need inclusive) are in a position to apply them they will do so. There is need to offer environmental science courses, in all higher institutions. Also, in Nigeria all undergraduates are expected to participate in the general studies programme which requires selecting an additional course from either humanities, science, agriculture and technology. Each student must take two of these courses from the field outside his or her study. This means that at the end of university education, the graduate female should be knowledgeable on environmental education.

Non-formal education programmes, usually take place outside the school system and for all ages. The educational programme could be channeled through:

- Adult education classes which could be organized in towns and villages and financed by local governments, NGOs and other interest groups and agencies.

- Print and broadcast media like newspapers, radio, television, bill boards, cartoons and other audio-visual methods which are quite effective in disseminating information to the special needs persons especially.
- Clubs, organizations, socio-cultural and religious groups and other forms of meetings.

The learning content should be broad based, localized and directed at problems that are visible or anticipated in each locality. The female students (especially the persons with special needs) should be enlightened about the effects of air pollution and how to cope with it; others are flood control, proper waste disposal and sanitation and domestic health and hygiene. This is to change their notions and attitudes towards the environment and help them to commit themselves towards working individually and collectively for a better environment as well as for sustainable life styles (Aina and Salawu, 1992).

## CONCLUSION

Over the years, due to negligence and lack of knowledge and skill, the environment has been polluted over the years. Air and water pollution, waste disposal, deforestation and land degradation are some of the problems that have to be tackled by the present generation in order to sustain the environment for the future. Women (persons with special needs inclusive) interact more closely with nature and the environment. They are the suppliers of fuel in the family for cooking, tenderers of animals and mothers of all. Consequently, they create some of these environmental problems and are at the receiving end of these problems. To this end, it becomes paramount that a well constructed educational programmes be implemented at all levels for female (persons with special needs inclusive); both formal and informal to curb the degradation of the environment and the health hazards associated with it and also prevent the effects (especially disabilities) on all members of the society.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are suggested by this paper.

- There should be formal training of special/regular teachers; workshops, conferences and other training programmes should be organized for the teachers to improve their knowledge on environmental education. Such programmes could be organized at the national, state, local government and school levels.
- At school girls (special needs persons in particular) should be encouraged to form conservation clubs and societies to create and promote environmental awareness.
- There should be network for interactions between student groups, teachers and non-governmental organizations and agency on environmental sustainability.
- Some subjects taught in the primary and secondary schools on environmental education could be made compulsory for all students especially girls who are special needs. Also, at the tertiary level, more students need to be encouraged to take courses on environmental education. At the informal level, information and training about managing and sustaining the environment could be packaged for them.
- Government could enact effective environmental laws and policies to ensure sustained environmental protection. Policies on environmental education will also compel the introduction and teaching of some core courses on environmental education for all females especially the special needs persons.

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